DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 945 CS 205 292

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TITLE Internship at a Crossroads: Selected Perspectives from Research on Newspaper Programs for Students in Journalism.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (62nd, Houston, TX, August 5-8, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Guidelines; Higher Education; *Internship Programs; *Journalism Education; Newspapers

ABSTRACT

This paper points out the lack of agreement concerning journalism education's internship program standards and the dearth of research assessing the effects of internship experience on journalism students. After listing some common concerns regarding internships in journalism education, the paper presents the guidelines for conducting internship programs proposed by the Association for Education in Journalism and the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation and stresses the importance of communication between organizations offering such programs. (AEA)

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ED178945

INTERNSHIP AT A CROSSROADS

SELECTED PERSPECTIVES FROM RESEARCH ON NEWSPAPER PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS IN JOURNALISM

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Presented at Plenary Session of August 7, 1979

AEJ Convention, Houston, Texas

CS205272

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Although the benefit of mass media internship is presumed generally, and internships are becoming a more and more frequent element in journalism curricula, there exists an unsatisfying degree of agreement concerning internship program operational standards and a dearth of research assessing the results of internship experience.

Throughout the more than thirty years that internship programs have been a feature of education for journalism, there has been no comprehensive evaluation research designed to assess the behavioral impact of internship upon journalism students, or upon journalism program quality.

Various organizations have conducted surveys, from time to time, in descriptive research efforts aimed at charting the extent and design of programs, or to probe the attitudes of journalism educators, media people, and interns themselves toward existing programs. In recent years, for example, surveys have been made by AEJ itself, ASJSA, Women in Communication, the cooperative education committee of AEJ and the American Newspaper Publishers association foundation, and AEJ's newspaper division. The descriptive research discloses, uniformly, general agreement that internships are beneficial. There is little standardization of program practice, however, and some existing practices are seen as questionable.

The descriptive research bears out, generally, impressionistic articulations of common concerns, in education for journalism, that include the following:

1. Many academic units in journalism education exercise degrees of supervision and control over internship programs that are insufficient to insure the benefit attributed to such experience.

2. Because the definition of some internship projects are terribly vague, in terms that adapt themselves to operational factors, it is difficult--if not impossible--to determine appropriate credit.

3. For the preceding reasons, internships can--and sometimes do--become simple experience in parttime employment. Or, in the absence of pay, internship can be seen as exploitation of journalism students.

4. Over-dependence on internships, with their frequent emphasis on technical aspects of journalism, can give a student's career preparation too heavy a "trade-school" character.

The preceding concerns are those that have been identified most often in the descriptive research.

In the absence of extensive research of the evaluative type, however, we have little empirical basis for the presumption that students participating in internships are receiving a better education for careers in the media than those not engaged in internship projects. Obviously we need to test the common-sense thesis favoring internships rigorously, soon, in order to chart the future course of journalism education more responsibly.

Endorsing the generally-accepted premise that internships are beneficial, as a common-sense tenet of professional faith, various organizations have developed guidelines for conducting internship programs.

From extensive reviews of the resulting literature, and from its own research, the cooperative committee of AEJ and ANPA Foundation proposed the following guidelines:

1. Before embarking upon an internship program--or as soon as possible afterward--the department of school of journalism

should obtain the best possible articulation of shared perceptions (faculty and participating media people) concerning the benefits of internship experience, and therefore objectives of the program.

2. Within the general parameters of the media/school consensus on fundamental aims and purpose, each internship should be treated like a special project or individual study, with the needs of the interning student being fitted as carefully as possible to the existing opportunity.
3. Expectations of both school and media should be reflected as faithfully as possible, in a quite extensive description or proposal submitted for the prospective intern. (Standardized forms can be used, obviously, with specifics added.)
4. On-site supervision of the intern's day-by-day activity should be left to the designated in-the-field professional, out of respect for the cooperating medium's organizational integrity, but the responsible academic director, coordinator, or supervisor should monitor the experience regularly, and consult with the intern periodically.
5. Following completion of the internship, a comprehensive and detailed description of it should be prepared, and filed, to provide a meaningful report of that particular student's experience and also as part of a data base from which assessments of the program's success can be made. (It is perhaps the existing absence of firm data adaptable to scientific content analysis that explains the dearth of research in this field.)

From the inception of an internship program, it is important that all those involved agree on goals and operation, and that they all be kept informed of activity and progress. Some media and schools have developed formal "contracts," bureaucratic procedures, and elaborate forms to accomplish such communication. The methods and techniques that are appropriate obviously will differ, considerably, from organization to organization. Uniformly, however, the records and description of all internship projects should contain specificity and detail sufficient for both assessment of program success by an individual school's faculty, and also for feasible review and evaluation by an organization like ACEJ.

Internship program standards and criteria articulated by ACEJ should be a part of the accreditation process, but practical application of those criteria and standards probably will require improved records at individual schools and a national data base enabling more meaningful comparisons from school to school.

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